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BODY & SOUL

Provocative Experiments Show How Stereotypes Impair Intelligence

The Stigma Syndrome

BY MARK SCHOOFS

Students taking a standardized test sit in the same room for the same time, answering questions of the same difficulty. Surely the experience can't be so different for blacks and whites, or men and women, as to affect their scores.

But it can. Consider a recent series of experiments. Top-level college students were given a tough standardized test. In one group, students were asked to record their race just before the test, and in that group black students averaged far below their white counterparts. But in the second group, where race was never mentioned, blacks slightly outperformed whites. Somehow, the mere act of specifying race triggered a psychological cascade in blacks—but not in whites—that damaged their performance.

Similarly, male and female math students were given a challenging test. One group was told that the test revealed gender differences in mathematical ability, while the other was told that men and women perform equally. In the group told that gender mattered, women scored five times lower than men. But in the other group, they tied.

What's operating here, says Stanford psychologist Claude Steele, who conducted these experiments, is the threat of confirming a stereotype. By designating their race, black students realized that their score could be used to bolster the crass idea that blacks are dumber than whites. Suddenly, they were sitting in a hot seat. The same thing happened for the women who were told, in essence, that their performance might corroborate the notion that women are inferior to men in math. Even white men can get tripped up. Steele's colleague Joshua Aronson gave a math test to two groups of white male students. He told one group that Asians do better on the test, and those white students did worse than the other group.

These experiments do more than document the toxic effect of stereotypes. They illuminate how stigma works its harm.

IN STEELE'S EXPERIMENTS, the students most harmed by prompting the stereotype were, surprisingly, those who were smart and confident, and who cared about school. "There's a poignance here," says Steele. "They really want to perform well, but that desire exacerbates their anxiety."

Classically, psychological theory posits that stigmatized people internalize the stereotype: Women believe they are worse than men at math, and blacks believe they are academically inferior, and so they perform sub-par. But Steele says his experiments "dragged us to another conclusion."

The whiz kids didn't believe the stereotypes. Their anxiety was purely situational, like the innocent person whose pulse starts pounding when accused of a crime. The accused knows he's innocent, just as Steele's students know the stigma doesn't apply. But others might think they are "guilty" of the stereotype, and that causes

enough stress to impair their performance.

What about students who care less and have less ability? There's poignance here, too. Whether or not they are reminded of the stereotype, such black students consistently perform more poorly than their white peers, and such women consistently do worse in math than their male counterparts. But do they really believe they are inferior because of their race or gender? Steele suggests another explanation: Stigmatized as weak in academics, they simply cease caring, dismissing math, or school in general, as unimportant.

Given the well-documented 15-point IQ gap between black and white Americans, some scholars conclude that blacks are genetically less intelligent than whites. Such conclusions were always specious: The same 15-point gap has been found between stigmatized minorities and the dominant majority in societies as divergent as New Zealand, Israel, England, and even Japan, where the social groups are the same race. Now, Steele's experiments blast another

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hole in the race-IQ theory by showing how stigma sabotages intellectual performance.

Opponents of affirmative action cry foul when supposedly objective criteria are revised. But Steele's findings show that standardized tests are, well, not standard. Stigma steals points from some students but not from others, helping to keep minorities and women "in their place." Steele's work prods us to truly level the playing field.

It also forces us to reexamine the mind-body problem. Increasingly, psychology is tilting toward an all-physical conception of the mind in which consciousness gets reduced to a molecular mechanism. Depression is merely an imbalance of neurotransmitters, intelligence the optimal arrangement of synapses. But as Steele's experiments show, the mind reacts to ideas, not just molecules. Stereotypes pack a wallop, even though they are thoughts, not things. We live in our bodies, yes, but also in our myths.

If psychology abandons this truth to a clockwork biology, we will not only perpetuate injustice, we will fail to understand the human mind.